Yiddish Theater: A Hope in the Face of Hardship for Eastern European Jewish Immigrants in Chicago, 1880s to 1940s

Jamie Ehrenpreis
Niles North High School, Skokie
Teacher: Sarah Stucky

Jewish immigrants arriving in Chicago were travel-weary and downtrodden. Yiddish Theater offered hope. Despite poverty and prejudice in America and their home countries, these Eastern European Jews found a means to preserve their culture in the Chicago Yiddish Theater.

Between 1880 and 1925, eighty percent of the Jews living in Chicago were from Eastern Europe. Jews immigrated to the United States in response to anti-Semitism especially in Russia, where Jews were blamed for the war between Japan and Russia. Pogroms (attacks specifically directed at Jews) were prevalent. These Eastern European Jews (Ashkanazim) brought their own vibrant culture. More than ninety percent spoke Yiddish, a blending of Old-French, Italian, German, and Hebrew. Since Ashkanazim originated from many countries, Yiddish became the common means of communication.

Many Jewish immigrants worked in garment districts. Diseases, such as influenza, spread quickly. Poor ventilation and crowding characterized these "sweatshops". In 1894, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* stated that, "These places often become . . . frightful hot-beds of suffering and disease." In 1907, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* stated that few could afford adequate medication. The employers demanded 12-hour workdays, with 20-minute breaks daily. If a garment worker broke a sewing needle, they were responsible for its replacement. Workplaces were often extremely dangerous.

From 1880 to 1910, 550,000 Jews crowded into Maxwell Street, in an area of one square mile. Like most of Chicago, Maxwell Street lacked toilets, bathtubs and garbage

pick-up. These were not the conditions in America that the immigrants had imagined. Most had envisioned overflowing abundance, but instead found overwhelming poverty.

Hull House, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams, encouraged cultural expansion for minorities. A focus developed on Yiddish Theater. Hull House was a launching point for many Yiddish actors. Amateur choral groups and drama clubs called "Dramatish Kreizen" existed from the beginning of Jewish immigration, but the first professional Yiddish Theater company in Chicago was established in 1887. Jewish fraternal societies called "Landsmanchaften" also supported Yiddish Theater.

The year 1918 saw a surge in Yiddish Theater's popularity and quality. Improvement in artistic quality stemmed from educated Jews graduating from colleges or arriving from Eastern Europe. The emergence of high quality European Theater also was influential. Ellis F. Glickman, a Russian Jewish immigrant, is credited for the "Golden Age" of Yiddish Theater in Chicago, between 1920 and 1930. He established the Palace Theater, at Blue Island Avenue near Roosevelt Street, "widely known as the center of Jewish theatrical effort."

Attending a performance of Yiddish Theater would have been a financial strain on a sweatshop worker. In 1885, male Jewish immigrants earned an average of four dollars a week. The price of a ticket to a Yiddish Art Theater production was 15-20 cents, or about four percent of a worker's weekly earnings. Despite this, many attended the Yiddish Theater regularly.

Dorothy Tannenbaum, a 92-year old woman now residing in a nursing home in Skokie, watched shows every week with her mother and remembers the audience

laughing. The audience yelled at the actors, thus including themselves in the dramatic process.

Danny Newman, a well known Chicago press agent, was astounded by the quality of the shows that he saw, "Every actor was a great actor." Yiddish Theater actors were celebrities in the Jewish community. Audiences recognized the names of their favorite actors. Developments in lighting and stage design in the Yiddish Theater were later incorporated by English-speaking theater managers.

Flamboyant shows, and lifelike stories, served as a distraction for emotionally and economically distressed Jewish immigrants. Yiddish stars wore abundant makeup and elaborate costumes. They often dramatized wealthy, powerful characters. Actions were exaggerated and Yiddish stars acted with a grandeur that enchanted audiences.

Yiddish Theater also provided guidance through messages that affected audiences deeply. A popular theme was assimilation into American life. Ms. Tannenbaum fondly remembered a play containing such a theme she had seen 80 years prior, at age 12. She reminisced,

> there was a play and it stuck in my mind because it was the young girl, the daughter of the Jewish actors, she was like trying to be American and [speak] English and she was defying her parents . . . and she said something in English, but you know I forgot what it was, something like 'I'll do what I want to do'. She was very defiant.

Another significant theme is seen in "Donna Garcia Mendes." This play was about a wealthy Jewish family in Spain forced to convert to Catholicism by the Inquisition, but who secretly remained Jewish. The play dictates the dire importance of maintaining Judaism despite outside pressures to conform.

Yiddish Theater served as a reminder of Jewish life in Europe. The Yiddish Theater "was a mixture of recollection of the Old Country, the Old Values, and the clash with the new civilization," according to one history. When immigrants came to America, many did not teach their children Yiddish, and instead insisted on their mastery of English. George Seidman, a Chicago resident who had never been religiously observant, still attended the Yiddish Theater. "I understood Yiddish; not everything, but enough." Danny Newman explained that the Yiddish Theater helped Jewish immigrants maintain their own traditions. Eastern European Jews "had a happy identification with what they saw on the stage. It caused them to remember what they had left, and their grandparents and old lives." An example is a song called "Warsaw." "Warsaw, your name clings to me. Your name sings to me. Warsaw, city of one thousand colors." These images of a beautiful and prosperous Warsaw portray the nostalgia that Jewish immigrants felt for their pasts.

Yiddish Theater served the community and the individual. It amused and, educated, and did not allow traditions to be thrown away, even as Jewish immigrants assimilated into their new lives in America. [From Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*; ed. Lulla Rosenfeld. trans. Lulla Rosenfeld; Ira Berkow, *Maxwell Street*; Philip B. Bregstone, *Chicago and Its Jews*; *Chicago Stories: Jewish Chicago, 1833 to 1948*. Dir. Geoffrey Baer and Dan Protess. Perf. John Callaway, Mike Nussbaum. DVD; Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*; "Donna Gracia Mendes." Aleichem, Sholom. Playbill. *Yiddish Theater Association; 72 E. 11th Street*; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; Joseph Kammen, comp. *25 Favorite Jewish Songs: a Collection of Favorite Old Time Hit Tunes*. ed. Joseph Kamman. Arranged for Voice and Piano: Jack Kamman; Hyman L.

Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago*; Danny Newman, Interview. Ap. 12, 1985. 13 Dec. 206 <Chicago Jewish Archives>; Danny Newman, "The Yiddish Theatre." *The Sentinel's History of Chicago Jewry*; Student historian's interview with Danny Newman Dec. 14, 2006; Student historian's interview with George Seidman Dec. 9, 2006; and Student historian's interview with Dorothy Tannenbaum Dec. 9, 2006.]